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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GRANDE COMORE PRESIDENT CRITICIZES UNION PRESIDENT SAMBI

REF: A. 07 PARIS 3363

¶B. 08 ANTANANARIVO 759

Classified By: Political Counselor Andrew Young, 1.4 (b/d).

¶11. (U) This is an action message -- see para 9.

¶12. (C) SUMMARY: Grande Comore President Mohamed Abdouloihabi strongly criticized Union of the Comoros President Sambi during a January 15 meeting with AF-assistant, stating that Sambi was trying to weaken the political power of the islands for the benefit of the Union President (i.e., for Sambi) and trying to manipulate the electoral calendar to extend his time in office. Abdouloihabi also expressed strong concern that Sambi was trying to increase Shi'ia influence in the Comoros, and was critical of France's involvement in the Comoros and its handling of the Mayotte issue. Abdouloihabi favored strengthening Comoran ties with the West rather than with the Islamic world. Abdou Saadi, Grande Comore Minister for Equipment, Energy, Transportation, and Housing, who accompanied Abdouloihabi, requested assistance in developing a "sister state" relationship between Grande Comore and an American state, such as Hawaii. END SUMMARY.

¶13. (C) Embassy AF-assistant met on January 14 with Grande Comore President Mohamed Abdouloihabi and Abdou Saadi, Grande Comore Minister for Equipment, Energy, Transportation, and Housing. The meeting took place at the request of Saadi, a former expatriate Comoran living in France and working as a local government functionary in the Paris area. Saadi had originally made contact with us in 2007 and met sporadically with us to discuss events in the Comoros. He informed us several weeks ago that he had been named a minister for the Grande Comore and wanted us to meet with Grande Comore President Abdouloihabi during the latter's upcoming business promotion trip to France. The January 14 meeting lasted about two hours and allowed a discussion of events in the Comoros since the operation to oust Colonel Bacar from Anjouan.

Sambi Trying to Grab More Power?

¶14. (C) The message Abdouloihabi wanted to convey to the U.S. centered on his concern for the way President Sambi was becoming increasingly power-hungry. According to Abdouloihabi, Sambi was taking several steps to weaken the islands and strengthen the power of the Union President (i.e., himself). For example, Abdouloihabi said that Sambi was trying to change the title of each island's chief executive from "President" to "Governor." Abdouloihabi said that this was a minor issue that he could live with. However, Sambi was also trying to strip each island's legislature of its power to enact laws. The legislatures would instead serve as "advisory councils" to the "governors." Were all this to take place, the only real legislative body would be the Union legislature. This would completely violate the islands' autonomy, which was the basis

of the Union concept in the first place, Abdouloihabi argued.

¶5. (C) Abdouloihabi was also disturbed by a recent development -- Sambi's efforts to promulgate laws without the approval of the legislature or even in defiance of it. Abdouloihabi said that Sambi had tried to force the enactment of legislation that would make it easier to give Comoran citizenship to even "potential" financial investors in the Comoros. Abdouloihabi said that this was troubling because it opened the door to possible abuses involving, for example, the granting of citizenship to possibly shady characters interested in hiding behind a new nationality. Abdouloihabi said the legislature twice rejected this measure, whereupon Sambi, according to Abdouloihabi, signed it into law anyway.

¶6. (C) Abdouloihabi also said that Sambi was trying to manipulate the election system in ways that would result in his staying in office. First, Sambi had proposed that the Union President's term of office be extended from four to five years, which is the term of office for legislators. Then, Sambi thought that Anjouan's election calendar was out of sync because of Bacar's coup. Sambi was proposing that the Union Presidential election be postponed a year or two so that a full five years would have run, thus giving the Anjouan President a "full term," before holding national elections. So that could mean that Sambi could stay in office until 2013, far beyond his present mandate. Abdouloihabi firmly opposed such a scheme.

Sambi's Support for Shi'ism

¶7. (C) Echoing many of the points in ref B, Abdouloihabi

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was equally troubled by the possibility that Sambi would try to increase Shi'ia influence in the Comoros, even though Comorans were "98% Sunni." Abdouloihabi noted that Sambi had studied in Iran. Thus, extending Sambi's time in office would afford him more time to promote the Shi'ia cause. Abdouloihabi and Saadi expressed serious concern that the Comoros could become a more Shi'ia country and that its ties with the West would weaken. They both believed this would be an unfortunate development, especially if the Comoros grew closer to Iran, and they urged countries such as the U.S. to build ties with the Comoros in order to keep it on a more Western orientation. One way to counter Shi'ia influence was to increase study abroad opportunities for young Comorans, whom Islamic operatives often targeted for recruitment.

France

¶8. (C) Abdouloihabi and Saadi criticized what they described as continued French efforts to divide and weaken the Comoros, and increase French influence, via their foothold in Mayotte, France's "Departmental Collectivity" that remained under French control as a result of questionable referendums in 1974 and 1976. They noted a number of recent antagonistic French actions, such as switching Mayotte's international telephone code to match that of French overseas department Reunion; Mayotte had previously shared the same code as the other Comoran islands.

More significantly, France planned to hold a referendum in March 2009 which would allow residents to vote on whether to become a full French Overseas Department (a step up from its status as a Departmental Collectivity). Abdouloihabi and Saadi thought that Mayotte would vote in favor of such a status, largely because of the prospect of significant new French and EU economic development assistance. With that accomplished, France would have achieved its long-term desire of having a permanent, and possibly dominating, presence among the Comoros islands.

Action Request

¶9. (C) Saadi expressed strong interest in having Grande Comore establish a "sister state" relationship with an

American state, with Hawaii in mind because it too was an island community. He said that he would be open to partnering with an American city (or one of the Hawaiian islands) if a partnership with a state were not feasible. He requested our assistance on how to go about developing such a relationship. ACTION REQUEST: We would appreciate any information the Department could provide that we or Embassy Antananarivo could provide to Saadi. END ACTION REQUEST.

STAPLETON